

# Laptop Program Update

By Pamela Livingston

Visitors to the Peck School this year would see a very different scene than two years ago, when I wrote about a day in the life of a middle school student in the then six-year-old laptop program. (See “Laptops Unleashed: A Middle School Experience,” *L&L*, April 2004, pp. 12–15.) Since then, we have expanded our laptop program to include younger students, begun construction on two new buildings, and revamped the daily schedule.

## Expanded Laptop Program

Laptops are moving into the lower grades, with younger students at a ratio of two students per computer and sixth graders this year experiencing the one-to-one program.

We have moved some of our older laptops to the fifth-grade classes on a cart for teachers to use as needed. We have also converted our upper school computer lab into a lab for the K–5 students. Use of the upper school lab had dwindled steadily over the years with the ubiquitous laptops and wireless network access.

Peck's class of 2008 is the first sixth grade to participate in our ubiquitous laptop program. Teacher-directed activities are the impetus for laptops in the sixth-grade classrooms, with integration into English, history, math, science, and languages. We've also extended our wireless network into these classrooms so e-mail, network saving and printing, and access to our

library catalog and the Internet are available for these students.

This shift in laptop availability has allowed us to look at when and how we teach technology skills. So, we've taken a bold move this school year and eliminated our seventh- and eighth-grade technology classes. Because our mantra has always been tech integration and our teachers have been living this approach in their classrooms, it seemed time. We spent some time at the beginning of the year reinforcing e-mail, using the network to save and print, and caring for the laptops for the seventh graders, as this was also their first year in the one-to-one environment. We will continue this refresher training in future years, just to make sure the skills stuck over the long summer between grades.

This change, of course, made our sixth-grade technology class more important. This class provides the skills used in math, science, English, history, and language classes. For instance, before undertaking a history project, sixth graders learn about appropriate Internet sites and Boolean searching.

Our goal this year is to make the technology skills we teach sticky, as described by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *The Tipping Point*. We want

students to be able to complete certain technology-based tasks (e.g., printing from the network) no matter which building they are in, so we have introduced some mnemonics to help. Last year, we introduced LARK to guide students' use of computers: anything students do with their laptops should be Legal, Appropriate, Responsible, and Kind. This year, we talk about the WWWs of student work: What is your file called? Where is it saved? Which printer did you select? Walking around to check each student, having them use “Save As” instead of Save to manually place documents in the right folders, and checking that they are logged onto the network and not just using the computer's hard drive, seems time-consuming. But, in October, we had already noticed that students are getting a little tired of being asked to “save as” and show where their files are being saved, so that means the skills are already sticking!

Reflections  
on the Effects of  
One-to-One Computing  
in a Middle School

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## New Buildings

It's hard not to gush when talking about our new buildings being constructed right around us. The buildings will be completely wireless! We have done an excellent job placing wireless access points around the current buildings, but our network manager and technical support specialist relish having newer wireless devices and an all-school wireless upgrade.

The Technology Department is making sure everything is wired and planned properly so that on day one, laptops will be fully operational anywhere teaching and learning happens at Peck. We're meeting with network engineers, systems integrators, voice and data experts, architects, and general contractors. Our network manager and technical support specialist have spent hours on architectural plans, drawing triangles for data and voice, and symbols for speakers and phone lines. As head of technology, I'm part of these meetings and also one of the Peck School representatives on the construction committee that meets weekly with the architects, general contractor, and several Board of Trustee building committee members.

One of our plans is to have a centralized technology area next to the library. Having our entire technology team housed together and ready to help students and teachers use technology will be a great help in streamlining our workflow.

Plus, laptop loaners, power supplies, spare batteries, and other equipment will all be in one location, allowing us to provide even better support to our students and teachers. Being close to the library is another benefit of this new locale. There's always been a synergy between tech and the library, and soon we will have physical proximity to boot. Our library catalog is fully automated, with catalog look-up stations and stationary computers planned in the new space. Of course, laptops will be welcome, and we will have wireless capability throughout.

Infrastructure is an important component to any network, so all this time is well spent and ensures that laptops and students won't miss a beat during the year of construction. It also means that when the new buildings are ready, laptop and network access will be ready, too.

## New Schedule

Rather than a standard five-day schedule, Peck worked with a consultant to create a rotating six-day schedule with 13 distinct periods of varying length, with homeroom just 10 minutes and most classes between 40 and 60 minutes. Classes meet during specific periods on specific days; for example, A3, D4, E3, and F9 (A day third period, D day fourth period, etc.) might be when a history class meets. With this rotation, history misses B and C day. In between meeting times, other classes meet. Although it may seem like an initial cognitive challenge, the reality is that more flexibility results.

There is a "Peck Block" every day that can be either Advisory, Clubs, All School Assembly, or Academic Help. Students can move in and out of various courses, such as technology,

current events, ethics, and multidisciplinary offerings.

With the new schedule comes flexibility and options. For instance, we have clubs including Tech Team Help. These students are exposed to network, hardware, and software support issues and solutions. And we offer instruction in such technology topics as iMovie, Adobe Photo Elements, and advanced PowerPoint and public speaking, for students who choose it. With one-to-one laptops and a wireless school for three grade levels, we aren't dependent on scheduling the computer lab for every technology offering. Thus we can offer more simultaneous, integrated experiences in our classrooms.

## The Glue of Laptops Holds Us Together

Peck and many other schools are doing tremendous things with their one-to-one programs. There will be an entire generation of students soon who will have known firsthand the advantage of learning during this digital age. Many of these students won't even be aware that not so long ago learning with computers meant leaving your classroom and walking to the computer lab once a week for isolated, non-integrated lessons.

When laptop-enabled schools like Peck make changes, such as implementing a new schedule and undergoing construction, they can rely on the glue of laptops for learning, studying, and communicating. Take the metaphor a bit further and add the stickiness of solid computer skills, and who knows what our children might accomplish.



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Pamela Livingston is head of technology at The Peck School. Her book *1-to-1 Learning: Laptop Programs That Work* will be published in 2006 by ISTE. It distills interviews with laptop educators, salient points from current laptop research, and what she learned at Peck heading up their laptop program.